

CONWAY (SIR RICHARD CONWAY) WOKE EARLY, and went to the window to have a look at the Trevor Donaldsons' garden. Too green. A flight of mossy steps led up from the drive to a turfed amphitheatre. This contained a number of trees of the lead-pencil persuasion, and a number of flowerbeds, profuse with herbaceous promises which would certainly not be fulfilled that weekend. The summer was heavy-leaved and at a moment between flowerings, and the gardener, though evidently expensive, had been caught bending. Bounding the amphitheatre was a high yew hedge, an imposing background had there been any foreground, and behind the hedge a heavy wood shut the sky out. OF course what was wanted was colour. Delphinium, salvia, red-hot-poker, zinnias, tobacco-plant, anything. Leaning out of the baronial casement, Conway considered this, while he waited for his tea. He was not an artist, nor a philosopher, but he liked exercising his mind when he had nothing else to do, as on this Sunday morning, this country morning, with so much ahead to be eaten, and so little to be said.

The visit, like the view, threatened monotony. Dinner had been dull. His own spruce gray head, gleaming in the mirrors, really seemed the brightest object about. Trevor Donaldson's head was mangy, Mrs Donaldson's combed up into bastions of iron. He did not get unduly fussed at the prospect of boredom. He was a man of experience with plenty of resources and plenty of armour, and he was a decent human being too. The Donaldsons were his inferiors—they had not travelled or read or gone in for sport or love, they were merely his business allies, linked to him by a common interest in aluminium. Still, he must try to make things nice, since they had been so good as to invite him down.

"But it's not so easy to make things nice for us business people," he reflected, as he listened to the chonk of a blackbird, the clink of a milk-can, and the distant self-communings of an electric pump." We're not stupid or uncultivated, we can use our minds when required, we can go to concerts when we're not too tired, we've invested—even Trevor Donaldson has—in the sense of humour. But I'm afraid we don't get much pleasure out of it all. No. Pleasure's been left out of our packet." Business occupied him increasingly since his wife's death. He brought an active mind to bear on it, and was quickly becoming rich.

He looked into the dull costly garden. It improved. A man had come into it from the back of the yew hedge. He had on a canary-coloured shirt, and the effect was exactly right. The whole scene blazed. That was what the place wanted—not a flowerbed, but a man, who advanced with a confident tread down the amphitheatre, and as he came nearer Conway saw that besides

being proper to the colour scheme he was a very proper youth. His shoulders were broad, his face sensuous and open, his eyes, screwed up against the light, promised good temper. One arm shot out at an angle, the other supported a milk can. "Good morning, nice morning," he called and he sounded happy.

"Good morning, nice morning," he called back. The man continued at a steady pace, turned left, and disappeared in the direction of the servants' entrance, where an outburst of laughter welcomed him.

Conway hoped he might return by the same route, and waited. "That is a nice-looking fellow, I do like the way he holds himself, and probably no nonsense about him," he thought. But the vision had departed, the sunlight stopped, the garden turned stodgy and green again, and the maid came in with his tea. She said, "I'm sorry to be late, we were waiting for the milk, sir." The man had not called him sir, and the omission flattered him. "Good morning, sir" would have been the more natural salutation to an elderly stranger, a wealthy customer's guest. But the vigorous voice had shouted "Good morning, nice morning," as if they were equals.

Where had he gone off to now, he and his voice? To finish his round, welcome at house after house, and then for a bathe perhaps, his shirt golden on the grass beside him. Ruddy brown to the waist he would show now. . . . What was his name? Was he a local? Sir Richard put these questions to himself as he dressed, but no vehemently. He was not a sentimentalist, there was no danger of him being shattered for the day. He would have liked to meet the vision again, and spend the whole of a Sunday with it, giving it a slap-up lunch at the hotel, hiring a car, which they would drive alternately, treating it to the pictures in the neighbouring town, and returning with it, after one drink too much, through dusky lanes. But that was sheer nonsense, even if the vision had been agreeable to the programme. He was staying with the Trevor Donaldsons; and he must not repay their hospitality by moping. Dressed in cheerful gray, he ran downstairs to the breakfast-room. Mrs Donaldson was already there, and she asked him how his daughters were getting on at their school.

Then his host followed, rubbing his hands together, and saying "Aha, aha!" and when they had eaten they went into the other garden, the one which

sloped towards the water, and started talking business. They had not intended to do this, but there was also of their company a Mr Clifford Clarke, and when Trevor Donaldson, Clifford Clarke and Richard Conway got together it was impossible that aluminium should escape. Their voices deepened, their heads nodded or shook as they recalled vast sums that had been lost through unsound investments or misapplied advice. Conway found himself the most intelligent of the three, the quickest at taking a point, the strongest at following an argument. The moments passed, the blackbird chonk-chonked unheeded, unnoticed was the failure of the gardener to produce anything but tightly furled geraniums, unnoticed the ladies on the lawn, who wanted to get some golf. At last the hostess called, "Trevor! Is this a holiday or isn't it?" and they stopped, feeling rather ashamed. The cars came round, and soon they were five miles away, on the course, taking their turn in a queue of fellow merry-makers. Conway was good at golf, and got what excitement he could from it, but as soon as the ball flew off he was aware of a slight sinking feeling. This occupied them till lunch. After coffee they walked down to the water, and played with the dogs—Mrs Donaldson bred Sealyhams. Several neighbours came to tea, and now the animation rested with Donaldson, for he fancied himself as a country magnate, and wanted to show how well he was settling into the part. There was a good deal of talk about local conditions, women's institutes, education through discipline, and poaching. Conway found all this quite nonsensical and unreal. People who are not feudal should not play at feudalism, and all magistrates (this he said aloud) ought to be trained and ought to be paid. Since he was well-bred, he said it in a form which did not give offence. Thus the day wore away, and they filed in the interval before dinner by driving to see a ruined monastery. What on earth had they got to do with a monastery? Nothing at all. Nothing at all. He caught sight of Clifford Clarke looking mournfully at a rose-window, and he got the feeling that they were all of them looking for something which was not there, that there was an empty chair at the table, a card missing from the bridge-pack, a ball lost in the gorse, a stitch dropped in the shirt; that the chief guest had not come. On their way out they passed through the village, on their way back past a cinema, which was giving a Wild West stunt. They returned through darkling lanes. They did not say, "Thank you! What a delightful day!" That would be saved up for tomorrow's departure. Every word would be needed then. "I have enjoyed myself, I have, absolutely marvelous!" the

women would chant, and the men would grunt, as if moved beyond words, and the host and hostess would cry, "Oh but come again, then, come again." Into the void the little unmemorable visit would fall, like a leaf it would fall upon similar leaves, but Conway wondered whether it hadn't been, so to speak, specially negative, out of the way unflowering, whether a champion, one bare arm at an angle, hadn't carried away to the servants' quarters some refreshment which was badly needed in the smoking-room.

"Well, perhaps we shall see, we may yet find out," he thought, as he went up to bed, carrying with him his raincoat.

For he was not one to give in and grumble. He believed in pleasure; he had a free mind and an active body, and he knew that pleasure cannot be won without courage and coolness. The Donaldsons were all very well, but they were not the whole of his life. His daughter were all very well, but the same held good of them. The female sex was all very well and eh was addicted to it, but permitted himself an occasional deviation. He set his alarm watch for an hour slightly earlier than the hour at which he had woken in the morning, and he put it under his pillow, and he fell asleep looking quite young.

Seven o'clock tinkled. He glanced into the passage, then put on his raincoat and thick slippers, and went to the window.

It was a silent sunless morning, and seemed earlier than it actually was. The green of the garden and of the trees was filmed with gray, as if it wanted wiping. Presently the electric pump started. He looked at his watch again, slipped down the stairs, out of the house, across the amphitheatre and through the yew hedge. He did not run in case he was seen and had to explain. He moved at the maximum pace possible for a gentleman, known to be an original, who fancies an early stroll in his pyjamas. "I thought I'd have a look at your formal garden, there wouldn't have been time after breakfast" would have been the line. He had of course looked at it the day before, also at the wood. The wood lay before him now, and the sun was just tipping into it. There were two paths through the bracken, a broad and a narrow. He waited until he heard the milk-can approaching down the narrow path. Then he moved quickly, and they met, well out of sight of the Donaldsonian demesne.

“Hullo!” he called in his easy out-of-doors voice; he had several voices, and knew by instinct which was wanted.

“Hullo! Somebody’s out early!”

“You’re early yourself.”

“Me? Whor’d the milk be if I worn’t?” the milkman grinned, throwing his head back and coming to a standstill. Seen at close quarters he as coarse, very much of the people and of the thick-fingered earth; a hundred years ago his type was trodden into the mud, now it burst and flowered didn’t care a damn.

“You’re the morning delivery, eh?”

“Looks like it.” He evidently proposed to be facetious—the clumsy fun which can be so delightful when it falls from the proper lips. “O’m not the evening delivery anyway, and I’m not the butcher nor the grocer, nor’m I the coals.”

“Live around here?”

“Maybe. Maybe I don’t. Maybe I flop about in them planes.”

“You live around here, I bet.”

“What if I do?”

“If you do you do. And if I don’t I don’t.”

“This fatuous retort was a success, and was greeted with doubled-up laughter. “If you don’t you don’t! Ho, you’re a funny one! There’s a thing to say! If you don’t you don’t! Walking about in yer night things, too, you’re ketch a cold you will, that’ll be the end of you! Stopping back in the ‘otel, I suppose?”

“No. Donaldson’s. You saw me there yesterday.”

“Oh, Donaldson’s, that’s it. You was the old granfa’ at the upstairs window.”

“Old granfa’ indeed. . . . I’ll granfa’ you,” and he tweaked at the impudent nose. It dodged, it seemed used to this sort of thing. There was probably nothing the lad wouldn’t consent to if properly handled, partly out of mischief, partly to oblige. “Oh, by the way. . . .” and he felt the shirt as if interested in the quality of its material. “What was I going to say?” and he gave the zip at the throat a downward pull. Much slid into view. “Oh, I know—when’s this round of yours over?”

“’Bout eleven. Why?”

“Why not?”

“’Bout eleven at night. Ha ha. Got yer there. Eleven at night. What you want to arst all them questions for? We’re strangers, aren’t we?”

“How old are you?”

“Ninety, same as yourself.”

“What’s your address?”

“There you go on! Hi! I like that. Arstin questions after I tell you No.”

“Got a girl? Ever heard of a pint? Ever heard of two?”

“Go on. Get out.” But he suffered his forearm to be worked between massaging fingers, and he set down his milk-can. He was amused. He was charmed. He was hooked, and a touch would land him.

“You look like a boy who looks all right,” the elder man breathed.

“Oh, stop it. . . . All right, I’ll go with you.”

Conway was entranced. Thus, exactly thus, should the smaller pleasures of life be approached. They understood one another with a precision impossible for lovers. He laid his face on the warm skin over the clavicle,

hands nudged him behind, and presently the sensation for which he had planned so cleverly was over. It was part of the past. It had fallen like a flower upon similar flowers.

He heard “You all right?” It was over there too, part of a different past. They were lying deeper in the wood, where the fern was highest. He did not reply, for it was pleasant to lie stretched thus and to gaze up through bracken fronds at the distant treetops and the pale blue sky, and feel the exquisite pleasure fade.

“That was what you wanted, wasn’t it?” Propped on his elbows the young man looked down anxiously. All his roughness and pertness had gone, and he only wanted to know whether he had been a success.

“Yes. . . . Lovely.”

“Lovely? You say lovely?” he beamed, prodding gently with his stomach.

“Nice boy, nice shirt, nice everything.”

“That a fact?”

Conway guessed that he was vain, the better sort often are, and laid on the flattery thick to please him, praised his comeliness, his thrusting thrashing strength; there was plenty to praise. He liked to do this and to see the broad face grinning and feel the heavy body on him. There was no cynicism in the flattery, he was genuinely admiring and gratified.

“So you enjoyed that?”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“Pity you didn’t tell me yesterday.”

“I didn’t know how to.”

“I’d a met you down where I have my swim. You could ‘elped me strip, you’d like that. Still, we mustn’t grumble.” He gave Conway a hand and

pulled him up, and brushed and tidied the raincoat like an old friend. “We could get seven years for his, couldn’t we?”

“Not seven years, still we’d get something nasty. Madness, isn’t it? What can it matter to anyone else if you and I don’t mind?”

“Oh, I suppose they’ve to occupy themselves with something or other,” and he took up the milk-can to go on.

“Half a minute, boy—do take this and get yourself some trifle with it.” He produced a note which he had brought on the chance.

“I didn’t do it fer that.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“Naow, we was each as bad as the other. . . . Naow . . . keep your money.”

“I’d be pleased if you would take it. I expect I’m better off than you and it might come in useful. To take out your girl, say, or towards your next new suit. However, please yourself, of course.”

“Can you honestly afford it?”

“Honestly.”

“Well, I’ll find a way to spend it, no doubt. People don’t always behave as nice as you, you know.”

Conway could have returned the compliment. The affair had been trivial and crude, and yet they both had behaved perfectly. They would never meet again, and they did not exchange names. After a hearty handshake, the young man swung away down the path, the sunlight and shadow rushing over his back. He did not turn round, but his arm, jerking sideways to balance him, waved an acceptable farewell. The green flowed over his brightness, the path bent, he disappeared. Back he went to his own life, and through the quiet of the morning his laugh could be heard as he whooped at the maids.

Conway waited for a few moments, as arranged, and then he went back too. His luck held. He met no one, either in the amphitheatre garden or on the stairs, and after he had been in his room for a minute the maid arrived with his early tea. "I'm sorry the milk was late again, sir," she said. He enjoyed it, bathed and shaved and dressed himself for town. It was the figure of a superior city-man which was reflected in the mirror as he tripped downstairs. The car came round after breakfast to take him to the station, and he was completely sincere when he told the Trevor Donaldsons that he had had an out-of-the-way pleasant weekend. They believed him, and their faces grew brighter. "Come again then, come by all means again," they cried as he slid off. In the train he read the papers rather less than usual and smiled to himself rather more. It was so pleasant to have been completely right over a stranger, even down to little details like the texture of the skin. It flattered his vanity. It increased his sense of power.